

2003

Christian Liberty: Living for God in a Changing Culture

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Christian Liberty: Living for God in a Changing Culture

Disciplines

Christianity | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Publisher

Baker Books

Publisher's Note

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ISBN

0801064600

CHRISTIAN *liberty*

LIVING *for* GOD
IN A
CHANGING CULTURE

R E X M.
R O G E R S



Baker Books

A Division of Baker Book House Co
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516

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Introduction

CHRISTIAN THEMES IN CHANGING TIMES

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

John 17:18

The story is told of an old farmer who loved to fish and who served as a deacon in his local church. When the young pastor convened deacons' meetings, the old farmer would sit for long periods saying nothing. He'd listen to the interminable discussions about seemingly weighty but rather arcane matters and eventually, when asked his opinion, would simply say, "Small fish." In response to very few issues, the farmer would say, "Big fish." After several weeks of this behavior, the young pastor finally worked up the courage to ask the old gentleman what his comments meant. The old farmer said, "Son, when I catch a fish that's too small, I throw it back. I only get excited and spend my time on the big fish."

The moral of the story is, of course, that Christians are adept at wasting hours on "small-fish" issues. We major on the minors and, as a result, sometimes miss the majors. We need to focus our attention and our spiritual energy on "big-fish" issues. Anything less than this makes us ineffective "fishers of men."

BIG-FISH AND SMALL-FISH SOCIAL CHANGE

This book is about Christians struggling with social change. It's not about biblical Christianity struggling with social change, because it's not God who struggles; he knows what he's doing. It's Christians who struggle. We (and I'll keep saying "we," for I'm a Christian too) Christians don't handle social change very well.

On one level Christians, along with everyone else, are buffeted by rapid and far-reaching social change. However you want to look at it, the culture in which we live is experiencing enormous and comprehensive social change. We're witnessing the declining influence of one culture and its underlying values, what's been called *Modernity*, and the growing influence of another culture and its underlying values, something we call *Postmodernity*.

If you could think of Modernity as a dinner party, religion, including biblical Christianity, would be the uninvited guest. Religion was sent away from the cultural table, so to speak, by Modernity. Human reason took its place at the head of Modernity's table, with science seated on one side and technology seated on the other. Some of the other guests included humanism and a process called secularization that de-emphasizes all religions.

Postmodernity's guest list is different. Postmodernity tolerates religion, including biblical Christianity, at the table once again. But biblical Christianity is invited back to the table under Postmodernity's own terms and along with innumerable other philosophy or worldview guests, like spiritualism and New Age thought. Postmodernity doesn't seem to put any one worldview at the head of the table. In fact it appears that Postmodernity suggests there is no head of the table. No philosophy is favored at all, except possibly moral relativism—the idea that truth or absolutes of right and wrong do not exist.

Far-reaching, life-influencing social change of this magnitude, particularly its moral relativism, is producing a culture crisis in the United States and in other so-called developed countries of the world. It is the "big fish" of our day. "Crisis" sounds a bit over the top, and if we were simply talking about a new toy or tool, it would be. But we're not talking about new things; we're talking about changes in basic values, the way we think about the world. This big fish is showing up in education, religion, business, entertainment, medicine, politics, and more.

Some Christians aren't sure what to make of this culture crisis. Many Christians are confused by it, and most haven't applied their Christian faith to these current cultural issues.

On another level a lot of Christians are distracted by social change in their churches or, more broadly, the Christian community. Christians are confused about which church practices or methods (like music or church service format) and which personal lifestyle choices (like fads and fashions or entertainment) they should embrace or reject. Since we're not sure what to do, most of us retreat to the false security of rules and traditions. We develop codes of behavior God never commanded, ones that limit more than liberate our Christian impact on the world. Passions are running so high in these debates that Christians have found themselves in a multi-issue, continuous culture war within the church.

My experience in Christian higher education has been one long culture war. The Christian community is incredibly sensitive to cultural concerns. For example, many are quick to conclude that an entire school is un-Christian because of the music played before a basketball game, and they're all too willing to act as judge, jury, and executioner. In the name of Christian character, Christians write amazingly torrid, even nasty letters of criticism before checking their facts. And they send copies of such letters to board members, area pastors, and anyone else they think may respond to their power play.

Christians accuse the school of improper conduct because they see one student with long hair or unnaturally colored hair or moussed hair. In this culture war scenario, if the school does not confiscate students' questionable music CDs, then the school must be condoning the worst of contemporary music. If students are taught spiritual discernment as opposed to a rules-based approach to student spiritual formation, then the school is "going liberal." If a faculty member doesn't wear a tie, he and the school must surely be departing from the faith. If a student praise band is used in chapel services, featuring guitars and drums rather than piano and organ, then the school is pandering to contemporary whims. If a faculty member reads the Harry Potter books and liked the first film, then clearly no one at that school knows anything about the Christian faith, and so it goes, on and on and on.

Meanwhile, none of these generally well-meaning Christians examines the school's confession of faith. No one asks to review the

school's mission statement or Christian philosophy of education. Very few Christian critics ever try to discover what the school means when we discuss Christian worldview and how it applies to all of life. The critics, our own version of Nehemiah's Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, demonstrate they are better at just being critical than at critical analysis of the cultural issues at hand.

One of the reasons Christians are struggling with these culture wars is that their theological understanding is either underdeveloped or ambiguous. Another is that many Christians equate their Christian faith with given cultural practices; then they judge others' spirituality on that basis. Either way, the result is the same—a lot of heat with very little light, impeded evangelism, and limited impact on our culture.

These issues are the small fish. I don't mean any disrespect for the people who fight these battles, for many of them are dedicated Christian people trying to do what they think God wants them to do. I do mean that these small-fish battles are not as important as the big-fish social changes, some of which stem from worldviews antithetical to biblical Christianity. And fighting these small-fish issues is not as important as our God-given responsibility to influence our neighbors and our neighborhood culture for Christ.

The postmodern culture crisis in which we find ourselves demands more of us than warm, fuzzy feelings or pop-Christian sentimentalities. It demands more of us than a superficial knowledge of the Bible. Expressing our Christian faith is important, but we'll need to do it in more meaningful ways than the correct but simplistic "Praise Jesus!" of many contemporary choruses or the "Hey Taliban, Get Saved" slogans on T-shirts. We will not be able to proclaim the truth of the Christian faith in the midst of this culture crisis if we believe that biblical Christianity is nice but just for our private lives. Christians who march in the Lord's army in this age must learn to think with a Christian worldview that speaks to all of life.

LOVING THE LORD WITH ALL OUR MINDS

Sometimes we forget that God gave us a brain as well as a heart. He expects us to use them both. God never told us, "Check your brains at the door of the church." Yet "comprehensive and coherent

Christian thinking has never been a major part of religious life in America.”¹ Christians are not generally known for their well-conceived interpretations of life and culture, so much so that Harry Blamires said, “There is no longer a Christian mind.”² He was discouraged and he meant that we don’t operate with a distinctively Christian philosophy of life.

A less friendly observer, Bertrand Russell, put an ironic twist on the problem, once saying, “Most Christians would rather die than think. In fact, they do.”³ Unfortunately, his comment rings disturbingly true. Christians have frequently been content to “turn off the mind and toe the line.”⁴

But Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30; see also Matt. 22:37). Our minds are important to God. He created both faith and reason. Our sovereign God is truth, and biblical Christianity is a logical faith. Others may escape from reason but not Christians. Biblical revelation is a testimony to Christians that not just reason but wisdom is part of God’s plan for us.

People tell us that it doesn’t matter what we believe or think, but this is a satanic lie. Lives and entire cultures that are built on false ideas always degenerate. Wrong thinking eventually leads to wrong doing. Find a person living a destitute and degraded life in the street, and you can trace his or her condition back to what that person believes and thinks. Watch a talented Hollywood star experience one troubled marriage after another, eventually ending up alone, and you’ll come to understand something about what that person believes or thinks. Consider the racial, ethnic, and religious wars of Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, or Northern Ireland, and you can trace the fighting to what these people believe and think. Observe a brilliant and talented president of the United States risk his presidency and his legacy on astoundingly immature moral choices, and you will know what he really believes and thinks. Ideas have consequences, so it does indeed matter what we think.

God commands Christians in Philippians 4:8 to think on certain godly virtues. In Romans 12:2 God tells us not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Salvation is just the beginning. “Nor is any individual conversion complete until a Christian mind is formed within. To bring our every thought into captivity to Christ, to think Christianly, to see all of life in relationship to the Creator and Lord of all,

this is not an optional appendage of secondary importance, but is at the very heart of what it means to be Christian.”⁵

Avoiding conformity to the world or culture presupposes a transformed and renewed mind. To be transformed and renewed, a Christian’s mind must be developed with a Christian worldview. This worldview is a philosophy of life that

- begins with personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord
- acknowledges the sovereign character of God
- grows in the grace and knowledge of God’s Word
- understands creation, the fall, and the Lord Jesus’ work of redemption and reconciliation
- applies this knowledge to an understanding of the times and the material and moral order in which we live

Developing a Christian worldview may not be easy, but it is exciting. Through a Christian worldview we’re privileged to learn God’s will and to see it come to life through his Word applied in his world. That was the experience of Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Wilberforce, Abraham Kuyper, Elisabeth Elliot, C. Everett Koop, and others. When we live on the basis of a Christian worldview, we can learn to deal with social change while building culture and winning others to Christ.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS

The second great commandment is this: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31). Aside from loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we are to love our neighbors as much as we naturally love ourselves.

There are five Hebrew words for *neighbor*, and only one means “housed around” or “bounded property.” The rest, like the one found in Leviticus 19:18, mean “an associate, friend, brother, companion, fellow, husband, lover.” In the New Testament, the phrase “love your neighbor as yourself” is used nine times. Two Greek words for *neighbor*, used a total of five times, mean “housed around” or “adjoining one’s ground.” All other usages of the word *neighbor* employ a Greek

word meaning “close by, fellow, Christian, associate, friend, countryman, man, companion, or stranger.”⁶ In other words, our neighbors are not just those in our local neighborhood.

Jesus took the concept of neighbor one step further, saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:43–45). Jesus corrected what the religious Jews had taught and restored the command to its original, broader Old Testament meaning.

Our neighbors are our fellow men and women. Romans 12:10 tells us to show brotherly love and to honor one another above ourselves. In Romans 12:13 we’re commanded, “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” In Romans 13:8 God says, “He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law”; and again in verses 9–10, “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbor.” In James 1:27 we’re directed to care for a certain kind of neighbor—the fatherless and widows. In James 2:1–9 we’re reminded that God does not approve of favoritism.

Our neighbors are all human beings, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender. Acts 17:26 reminds us, “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”

For Christians, God’s Word is even more pointed:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Galatians 5:13–15

Loving our neighbors, no matter what neighborhood they live in, is a biblically Christian theme. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. . . . Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:20–21).

CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY

How Christians love our neighbors and how we behave are directly linked to what we believe and how we think. How we react to the social changes around us and how well we make choices regarding cultural forms, methods, and practices depend on how attuned we are to God's will as expressed in his Word. Christians who have learned God's will and allowed the Holy Spirit to direct their lives will behave like Christ-followers. Christians who have not learned God's Word and who do not submit to the Holy Spirit's work in their lives will behave like the world.

So don't confuse the way Christians behave with biblical Christianity. I wish that I didn't have to say that, but it's true. More than once I've said this to non-Christians who earlier in life were burned by poorly behaving Christians or Christians who were overzealous in their drive to "get 'em saved." Christians don't always act Christianly. It's true for me, and, if you're a Christian, it's true for you. We don't always live in accordance with the teachings and values of the Bible. We disobey God. To put it bluntly, we sin.

Christians are sinners saved by grace. Praise God! But sometimes the sin is more evident than the grace. Think about racism as just one example. Have you ever considered what an incredible oxymoron it is to admit that some people are "Christian racists"? Christianity by its very nature is cosmopolitan, promoting the unity of the human race and brotherhood of all Christians.⁷ Racism is a direct affront to the biblical teaching that all people are made in God's image. Yet I have heard some of the more dedicated and otherwise faithful Christians I know use derisive racial slurs. How can this be? Apparently these Christians were never challenged to apply their Christian faith to their attitudes about race.

Years ago I hired a person to work in our Christian college who was married interracially. Christians called me, questioning the wisdom of this appointment, some even going so far as to suggest that there was something sinful about the marriage. What interested me at the time was that none of these callers credited the many years of faithful Christian marriage this couple modeled, nor did they comprehend how ironic (some would say hypocritical) it was for them to criticize a healthy interracial marriage while single-race Christian marriages were regularly ending in divorce.

I've seen "Christian racism" expressed in other ways: jokes—supposedly harmless but often harsh, biting, even cruel expressions about racial differences that Christians whisper to one another at church fellowships. I've heard such jokes on Christian college campuses and I've heard them at pastors' gatherings. Now let me ask you something. Would these jokes be told if persons of another race or ethnic group were present? Would a person of another race even come to such Christian gatherings if he or she knew racial jokes were part of the mix? Would a person of another race even be welcome? Jesus was a Jew. Would he be welcome?

God condemns "foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place" (Eph. 5:4). He created all human beings, and he loves us all. This biblical truth is taught in the childhood chorus, "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." Children seem to understand this truth, and we should learn from them.

And, by the way, racism is not just a white problem. Other races and ethnic groups evidence their own spiritual struggles with this very human failing.

Despite certain progress toward racial harmony since the 1960s, racism remains one of the most insidious sins in the world (including the Christian community) today. Yet you will go a long time in many if not most evangelical churches before you hear racism mentioned, let alone hear a sermon focusing on it.

A Cultural Church

Racism among Christians is just one reason for my saying don't confuse the way Christians behave with biblical Christianity. Christian people yield to sin. We develop our own interpretations of the world and of life rather than accepting God's interpretation. Often we do this for what we believe are the right motives. Then we build our worship of God and our church or religious practices around *our* philosophy and not God's teaching. Instead of a biblical or New Testament church, we've created a cultural church.

Christians can also develop a cultural church simply with the passage of time. Sinful choices may not have been involved originally, just cultural preferences and practices that in time take on a life of their own. They become traditions. After a while these traditions

may no longer evidence any recognizable root in biblical principle, and the traditions themselves may take on sacred status. Fidelity to Christianity is determined on the basis of fidelity to the sacred practices—to the traditions—whether these traditions are biblical or not. When this happens, the transformation is complete, and the traditions have displaced, and maybe even replaced, the Scriptures. Either way, with or without wrong motives, a cultural church develops.

A cultural church is a place of religiosity, or what some call churchianity, not biblical Christianity. Even though a varying number of threads of biblically Christian practice may be evident in the cultural church tapestry, the picture that emerges looks more like the surrounding culture than like biblical Christianity.

Testing Cultural Practices

Now I don't want to be guilty of either overstating or understating this problem. Cultural influence on people and therefore on the church and religious practice is a given. No matter who we are and where we live in the world, we always live in a culture. Not all humanly generated cultural practices are evil, nor are they all good. All cultural practices must be tested by a biblically Christian faith.

Therein lies the difficulty. It's too easy, just too human, to simply accept the values and lifestyle practices handed to us by our culture rather than test them against God's Word. Because the Bible is supposed to be our base, the problem becomes more sinister when everyone begins doing his or her own thing. Then the church grows off base.

For centuries Christians have wrestled with their proper relationship to culture. Ascetics denied themselves all manner of normal human needs in a misguided attempt to reach a higher or deeper spiritual plane. Monks in medieval monasteries and nuns in cloisters separated themselves so completely from society that in most cases they (with the notable exception of Martin Luther whose newly discovered Christian faith revolutionized his outlook on virtually everything) made little impact on the course of human events.

Present-day Old Order Amish and some Mennonites try to withdraw in varying degrees from contemporary culture or at least much of its lifestyle, as do some within conservative evangelical and Pentecostal movements. (Many groups that do not espouse Christian

faith also withdraw—some of these coalescing around environmental or antitechnology or anticorporate views. They live in communes and in general articulate a list of nonbiblical perspectives.)

For those who withdraw from culture, “the old familiar ways are more comfortable, less demanding, and less time consuming.”⁸ Many in these groups and myriad others like them become so proficient at withdrawing from culture that they develop a profound *isolation* from the people of their day.

A lot of theologically conservative churches fall into this trap. They tend to identify—indeed equate—their own selected lifestyle choices (including sometimes even secular, anti-Christian views) with biblical Christianity. In some cases they yield to *legalism* and then offer the non-Christian an either/or choice: Be like us or you aren’t going to heaven.

Among the more theologically liberal churches, the danger is not isolation but *accommodation*. During the twentieth century alone we’ve witnessed the theological liberalism of mainline churches, neo-orthodoxy, and liberation theology, all of which have been immersed in the forms, methods, and lifestyle choices of Modernity. Theologically liberal churches tend to identify so much with contemporary culture (including sometimes even secular, anti-Christian views) that they lose their distinctiveness, in some cases yield to license, and then offer the non-Christian little that is different from common culture.

As you can see, many liberal and conservative churches make the same mistake, albeit for very different reasons. They become cultural churches and lose their prophetic voice. Liberals *identify* with current culture. Conservatives *isolate or insulate* themselves from current culture, frequently creating their own subcultures. Neither approach is ultimately effective in God’s command to *interact* with culture.

So what would Jesus do?

THE “IN THE WORLD/ NOT OF THE WORLD” TENSION

In the New Testament Book of John, chapter 17, we can find the answer. In this passage of Scripture God recorded for us the true “Lord’s prayer.” It’s the prayer Jesus prayed just before his arrest, trials, and cru-

cifixion. He knew what he was facing, but he spent most of his time praying for his followers rather than for himself.

Jesus observes that Christians are in the world, but he wants them to be not of the world (v. 14). Then in the same prayer he seems to contradict himself and say Christians should go into the world (v. 18). What did he mean by this? It's simple, really, but powerful.

We live our lives in the world by virtue of *creation* (our physical beings) and *culture* (our way of life). But God does not want us to live our lives based on values and practices generated by human culture.⁹ He expects us to be *not of the world* by being identifiably different or distinctive via our *re-creation* (rebirth or salvation in Christ) and our work to *transform culture*. In turn, he commands us to go *into the world* and both develop and influence culture with Christian values—what Christians call the *Cultural Mandate* from the Book of Genesis—as well as win others to Christ in this world—what Christians call the *Great Commission* from the Book of Matthew.

“In the world, not of the world” and “into the world” are parts of God’s answer to Francis A. Schaeffer’s question, “How shall we then live?”¹⁰ God did not leave us without guidance for our cultural existence. Jesus cared and still cares about how we live. He prayed specifically for those of us who follow him today: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one” (John 17:20–21). He wanted us to learn to live properly in this world: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (vv. 15–17).

While God wants us to be different from the world, he put us in the world for a purpose. This is what I call the “in the world/not of the world tension.” It’s a tension from which we’ll never escape. Some try to escape it by drifting into license and others try to avoid it by embracing legalism, but neither approach works. As long as we live, we live in a culture—yet we’re commanded to lead lives that are distinctively different from others in that culture. It’s a spiritual tension God intended, for it allows us to exercise free will, responsibility, and love for his glory.

SALT AND LIGHT

God does not want Christians to be invisible or even low profile. He doesn't want us to be non-impact people. He's given us the gospel, the Good News, the greatest, most celebrated cause in all of history. We are his ambassadors for truth. Metaphorically speaking, God wants us to be both salt and light in this world (Matt. 5:13–16).

As salt, we're warned against losing our distinctiveness. Our presence in the world should be noticeable. Our Christian values should "flavor" our culture. As light, we're commanded, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (v. 16). Our presence in the world should challenge the darkness that sin and Satan bring. Christ's light shining through us should point the way to the Savior.

Now here's the point: How can we be salt and light in the world if we're confused and overwhelmed by social change, laden with our own rules and traditions, or distracted by culture wars within the Christian family? The answer is simple—we can't. Something's got to change.

In this book I'll develop nine principles for living a God-honoring Christian life in rapidly changing times:

1. We must affirm biblical Christianity and personal, saving faith in Jesus Christ.
2. We must develop a biblically Christian worldview, which yields spiritual discernment.
3. We must learn to anticipate change as much as order, for both are part of God's sovereign design for this world.
4. We must recognize that biblical Christianity is not about rules but about a relationship with Christ.
5. We must work to evangelize the lost, edify the saints, and transform the culture for the cause of Christ.
6. We must create culture by developing the potential of Post-modernity and ministering to its problems.
7. We must combat postmodernism, particularly its moral relativism.
8. We must model biblical community in the Christian church.
9. We must go into the world, speaking the truth in love.

CHANGING TIMES

Now What?

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Genesis 1:28

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:19–20

The Three Stooges, Curly, Larry, and Moe—sometimes accompanied by Curly Joe or Shemp—dominated early cinema and television with their uproarious slapstick comedy. They stumbled from one adventure to the next, made noise, embarrassed those around them, and created generalized chaos, yet always in the end they got the girl, did something worthy, and emerged the lovable heroes. They were considered so funny that they became Hollywood stars, made a great living, and were mimicked by count-

less people who applied the Stooges' phrases and behavior to everyday life.

But aside from a few people who still appreciate the Three Stooges' "classic" humor, most people today no longer consider the Stooges very funny. In fact now their physical comedy looks harsh or even mean, their antics appear infantile, and their jokes seem lame or even boring. Aside from the fact that these gentlemen have gone on to their reward, what happened?

Culture changed. The Three Stooges simply no longer connect with contemporary values, attitudes, and social conditions. They're no more relevant to the current spirit of the age than the Keystone Kops or knights in shining armor. If you are a comedian today, you've got to figure out a new way to be funny so you can be successful. If you're a Christian, you've got to figure out how to relate to your changing culture in a way that honors God.

CULTURAL HOMEWORK

Christians have work to do—homework. It's a history assignment from God. In the Bible's Book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 28, God gave all human beings his *Cultural Mandate*. People must develop, influence, even transform human culture in a manner that glorifies God. This command dates to the Garden of Eden and has never been rescinded. It encompasses all the activities of every man, woman, and child from Adam and Eve to you and me to the newest newborn.

In Matthew 28:19–20 God gave all Christians a second assignment, his *Great Commission*. Christians must go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything that God commanded. Being a representative of God in this world is the Christian's prime directive. It's what we're supposed to do. God expects Christians to be about his work throughout all of human history and in all human culture.

Culture is our way of life:

that activity of man, the image bearer of God, by which he fulfills the creation mandate to cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it. . . . Culture, then, is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its

riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God.¹

God made each of us with the ability to reason. We can think. We're rational, and we occupy a place in the cosmos a little lower than heavenly beings (Ps. 8:5). With that kind of pedigree we should not be formed by culture. In other words, culture should not create us; we should create culture.

Human beings *precede* culture and *create* culture as an expression of their religious faith. Culture is what we do with the creation God gave us—work, play, music, entertainment, clothing, diet, everything. What we do with the creation God gave us and why we do it depends directly on our religious views. That's why T. S. Eliot said culture is "lived religion."² Consequently, every culture crisis is a crisis of character, the result of apostasy from true faith.³

THE POSTMODERN PROBLEM

The early twenty-first century is a battleground for this kind of culture crisis, understood as two great culture wars. One is a macro culture war for the character and soul of human society, and thus the nation. The other is a micro culture war for the character and soul of the Christian community, or what we may call the church. The national culture war is the product of philosophic naturalism and its cousin, a generally accepted moral relativism that emphasizes subjectivity as the arbiter of morality and reality.

Naturalism, a rejection of the supernatural, particularly the God of the Bible, has become the dominant motif of our times. It's the idea that nothing can be known that we cannot test with our five senses. If you can't see, taste, hear, smell, or touch it, then it doesn't exist. Clearly, if there is no belief in a sovereign God and his standards, the door is open for a morality of human choice or a morality of the moment. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky described it, "If God is dead, everything is permitted."⁴ G. K. Chesterton later paraphrased this comment, noting that when God is dead, people do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything.⁵ Without God, nothing remains in every form of human endeavor but moral relativism, and this reli-

gious assumption defines an emerging mentality that is dominating the period of time now being called Postmodernity.

The Christian culture war is the product of an underdeveloped Christian worldview resulting in a practical ambiguity that confuses doctrine and dogma and ignores Christian liberty. A Christian worldview grounded in biblical revelation fosters a spiritual discernment capable of distinguishing truth from error, the consequential from the inconsequential, and the harmless from the harmful. A Christian worldview is the “full armor of God” with which we are able to “stand firm” (Eph. 6:10–18).

In both the macro and the micro culture wars there are individuals and groups who claim a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5). Both culture wars result from a denial of divine transcendence. God apparently isn’t who he claims to be.

The macro culture war can be seen in national debates over the politics of meaning, family values, or the politics of virtue, and in a gradual disappearance of an agreed on public attitude toward what is right or wrong—what were once considered the most fundamental beliefs of Western society. The macro culture war is also evident in a host of worldview battles pertaining to abortion, biomedical ethics, and evolutionary theory, and especially in a growing acceptance, even promotion, of sexually deviant morality.

The micro culture war can be seen in myriad Christian debates over church worship format, preaching styles, music, fashion, and entertainment, which have caused internecine church splits, and especially in the disappearance of a common view among biblical churches concerning sexually moral behavior. The Christian culture war is different from yet related to and even influenced by the national culture war.

The national culture war is rooted in moral relativism, the idea that God is irrelevant, so truth does not exist. The Christian culture war is rooted in theological ambiguity, the idea that God is relevant only if he fits our definition of him. The national culture war results from putting God outside our philosophic box. The Christian culture war results from putting God inside our philosophic box. Both perspectives miss the point that we are to worship God in spirit and in truth. Both miss the point that “It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Col. 3:24).

How do Christians survive this? Better yet, how do we thrive in this time of great change? Do we send an e-mail addressed to

God@Heaven.divine? Do we say to each other, “You’re okay; I’m okay; it’ll all be okay”? (It’s difficult to get three lies into one sentence, but there are three in that last one.) Do we develop Christian schizophrenia, a split spiritual personality with part believing God and part wondering if Christianity is really true?

Certainly one thing we cannot do is respond to postmodern culture with what Os Guinness calls a “Sunday school–level faith in a university–level society.” If you’ve ever searched for a church to join that offered more than Sunday school–level teaching, you probably know what I mean. In New York a few years ago, about forty-five minutes from the Big Apple, my family began what turned out to be an eighteen-month search for a Bible-believing, Bible-teaching church.

The first church we selected had no youth program. So, as the father of four young children, after about three months, I asked the pastor when they were going to start a youth program. He said, “When we get more youth, we’ll start a program.” I was just a visiting newcomer at that point, so I refrained from saying what crossed my mind: *That’s not how it’s done*. This pastor and consequently the church evidenced no vision whatsoever for the hundreds of young people populating the suburbs around them. He preached, but he didn’t connect with his community. So we left the church. A few months later, so did he.

Our stay at the next church lasted about two months. The pastor, who held a doctoral degree in theology from a distinguished seminary, preached fifteen-minute sermons limited on Scripture and laden with platitudes, which had no perceptible application to anything that was happening in our lives, in the city, or in culture at large. The same was true of the Sunday school class. The teacher did not teach; he facilitated, which is to say that he acted as moderator of a discussion in which everyone pooled their own ignorance of the Scripture: “I don’t really *feel* that God could send snakes to discipline the Israelites.” Or, “Surely Moses didn’t lead that many people into the wilderness; the Bible must be exaggerating a bit there.”

The straw that broke our camel’s back came a week before Christmas when I retrieved our children from the youth program only to learn that biblical teaching had been set aside in favor of making peanut brittle with the older children and making a Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer hand puppet with the little ones. I’m not against candy or Rudolph, but these things in the absence of bibli-

cal instruction could not prepare our children for a spiritually conflicted world.

Our stay at the next church lasted longer, and our youngest even accepted Christ as a result of this church's ministry. For this we are grateful. The young pastor and his wife were kind and dedicated, serious about their calling. They were "good Christian people." But he had been taught in seminary that the Christian life was pretty much summarized in evangelism. His sermons were filled with hell-fire and brimstone and at first were a pleasant antidote to the shallow platitudes we'd heard in our previous church. At least we were thumbing the Scriptures again. He gave an invitation every service, but after a while we realized the same people were going forward week after week.

One Sunday after we returned home, I said to my wife, "You know, Pastor would be happiest if we got saved every Sunday." Same sermon, different text. There were salvation altar calls every week but no preaching about growth in the grace and knowledge of the Word and no application to what was being reported in the *New York Times*. We left that church.

Finally, we found a church with a spiritually mature pastor who preached "the whole counsel of God" and who loved the Lord, loved his people, and encouraged us to go out and live a godly life in God's world. This fellowship became our church home during the next many months of our New York tour of duty before God moved us west. The pastor is now with our Lord, but during his life on earth he wisely worked to edify those under his care and send us out to do God's work in the world. His ministry, and therefore the church's ministry, was to help us dig deep into the Scriptures and learn to apply them to our lives, every part of our lives. Whatever *Newsweek* was reporting, whatever trends seemed to be developing in culture, whatever concerns were identified in the members of the church, they found their way into the pastor's sermons. By example as much as statement, he demonstrated that the Christian faith is relevant both to our Christian lives and to the lives of our non-Christian neighbors. We learned God's will for his church because the pastor shared his Christian worldview, his belief that God's people must live by the Scriptures and live out what they learn in the world.

God's will for us expressed in the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission is a call to action. People need to *be* something—a child of God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Christian people need

to *know* something—the truth of God’s revelation of his moral will. And Christians need to *do* something—live out their unchanging biblical faith in a rapidly changing world, which is the call of God.

RAPIDLY CHANGING TIMES

Social change is a fact of history. During our time, it’s been rapid social change. No, strike that. *Very* rapid social change. No, that’s not it either. I-can’t-change-fast-enough-to-keep-up-with-yesterday-let-alone-tomorrow social change is now an unavoidable fact of contemporary life. Try as we may, we can’t escape it. And it’s not just the funny quotient of the Three Stooges that has changed. Nothing—or at least it seems that way—stays the same.

People have been talking about change for a while. In his nineteenth-century masterpiece *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens eloquently said:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us . . .

Perhaps the beginning of the twenty-first century can reasonably be described as both the best and worst of times. But in this age of moral relativism and a rejection of the very idea of truth, can anyone really claim that the dominant worldview of this time offers wisdom, light, and hope? I don’t think so. In Dickens’s time intellectuals still believed in a better tomorrow. Today they’re not even sure there will be a tomorrow. This may sound exaggerated to you, but test me. Listen to avant-garde music or tour the postmodern section of the local art museum. You’ll soon understand what I mean. There is no truth, no meaning, no hope, just cynicism and despair.

Christians know better. But we’re too busy tilting at our own cultural windmills to fight the real enemy. Christians spend more time fussing with each other over minor cultural practices than we do creating or reforming culture. So far we’ve been more *reactive* than *proactive*.

The twentieth century was marked by more social change more rapidly experienced than perhaps any other time of history. Now our “normal” is more rapid social change. Prospects for the beginning of the twenty-first century suggest that if anything changes about social change it will be that change will happen even more rapidly. Rapid social change is now the typical experience of life. But a lot of people (and, you guessed it, Christians in particular) haven’t figured that out.

Most of us would rather avoid change altogether (especially aging). We’re creatures of habit. Sameness is familiar, therefore comforting. Sameness may be bland, but it’s friendly by definition. Routine is more to our liking. We don’t have to think. There’s no cognitive dissonance to rattle our equilibrium. We just react. Depending on the circumstance, that can be a good or a not-so-good thing.

Change, on the other hand, is usually unsettling—at least for a lot of folks. Change is a destabilizer. It often confuses and disorients people. For some people it’s downright scary. By definition, change means that things are different, and that creates uncertainty.

Unlike routine, change forces us to think. Our uncertainty grows when behaviors that fit an earlier time don’t seem appropriate in a new situation. Social change loosens our sense of ourselves, even our values. Change puts pressure on our belief systems. What we thought we knew may need to be rethought. This is true for the interpreters of biblical Christianity as well as for those of any other historic belief.

Marvin Mayers writes: “Since biblical Christianity is a dynamic process born in a changing setting and since it introduces change in the life of individuals and society, it resists being bound by the narrow ethnocentric and restrictive legalisms that often characterize the established church. Thus there arises in each generation a reformation.”⁶ In other words, the arrival of new choices, both in social and personal life, often makes the memorized responses of our parents’ generation—let alone our grandparents’ point of view—untenable.

Sadly, in the face of this kind of change, some people reject Christian belief not because Christian belief has failed but because believers have not applied its teachings in practical ways to the new situation. While it is clearly not accurate to say that no Christians apply their faith to culture in a way that honors God, it is eminently apparent that a majority of Christians have struggled mightily in the face of rapid social change. Consequently, opportunities for advancing God’s

kingdom in this potentially exciting era are lost because Christians are overwhelmed by change and are not in a position to influence it.

LOOKING FOR ZACCHAEUS

The single greatest obstacle to the church's fulfillment of both the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission is the inability of Christians to learn to deal with social change. When we should be engaging, influencing, and possibly transforming culture, we run from it. Social change has us baffled. When we should be armed with the Word of God and fighting sin and Satan, we are armed with our personal prejudices and fighting each other. When we should be confident in our Christian faith, bearing witness of its truth in the face of all other alternative worldviews, we cower before the other worldviews. When we should be "looking for Zacchaeus" in the marketplace and winning neighbors to Christ, we are withdrawn into our church subcultures for fear of being tainted by the world. But Zacchaeus doesn't come to the church anymore. He's in the world, in his own neighborhood, "up a tree" of his own making. We'll never reach him if we don't go looking for him. But even if we find him, we won't be able to speak his language because we don't understand the changing world in which he lives.⁷

Do you realize how much Christian jargon characterizes our speech? What does *fellowship* mean to a nonbeliever? What about *born again*, *clergy*, or *laity*? Would your non-Christian neighbors understand you if you said, "I'll meet you in the vestibule (or narthex)"? What is a backslider? What does the worship leader mean when he says, "Give someone a holy hug"? Do your non-Christian neighbors know what you mean when you talk about daily bread or devotions? Or if you said, "God *led* me to do this," would they understand? Our language fits our subculture, not theirs. Learning to communicate is key to our witness and influence.

Now let's turn it around. Do you know what your non-Christian neighbor means when she says, "I'm religious; I've always been religious"? Or, "I really hammered myself the other night on the way home"? What about, "I'm a Scorpio"?

Right after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, I traveled with a group of Christian educators to the Soviet Union. For the first three days

we were amazed at how many people told us, “I’m a believer. I believe in God.” We thought, *Are there this many Christians in Russia?* It took us a while to discern that what they really meant was, “I am not one of those godless Communists you’ve heard about.” They meant what we would mean if we said, “They’re religious.” Once this became clear to us, we began to gently tell them about the special meaning that Christians assign to the word *believer*. We need to learn Zacheaus’s language.

A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW CRISIS

A Christian worldview, grounded in the lordship of Jesus Christ and biblical revelation, is missing in most Christians’ lives, and this lack is the source of the church’s inability to deal with social change. In the next chapter we’ll discuss how Christians can develop their Christian worldview, but for now you should know that a Christian worldview is an understanding, based on biblical principles and values, of all of the world and life. Further, a Christian worldview is most effective when it is applied to everything we experience. We are to model biblically Christian values, to enact them in cultural practice, and to “speak the truth in love” to spiritually lost and dying neighbors. A biblically constructed Christian worldview is the only comprehensive framework of reality that actually fits with reality. It speaks to all of life. It makes sense. It works. It can be tested and found trustworthy. It explains both good and evil, and it provides truthful answers for our quest for meaning and significance. That’s why the church’s failure to teach a biblically Christian worldview greatly undermines the ability of Christians to engage culture and understand social change in a manner that fulfills God’s will. That’s why Satan is pleased.

Terry Crist describes the dilemma. He says that for too long Christians have

sat down at [the] table of unilateral disarmament with the enemy and said to him, in effect, “Don’t bother us and we won’t bother you! You can have the kingdoms of this world—entertainment, the arts, media, politics, athletics, law, economics—and we will take our Sunday school programs, Bible clubs, Christian conferences and home

Bible studies. If you leave us alone, we'll leave you alone." And we bargained off God's property! Because of our desire to escape the challenges of this life, we have held a century-long fire sale, liquidating our interests and influence in all of popular culture.⁸

We must understand that "genuine Christianity is more than a relationship with Jesus as expressed in personal piety, church attendance, Bible study, and works of charity. It is more than discipleship, more than believing a system of doctrines about God. Genuine Christianity is a way of seeing and comprehending all reality. It is a worldview."⁹ Living our Christian faith includes all of these practices, but a more fully developed understanding of biblical revelation's relevance to this world is also essential.

The unbiblical worldviews at work in postmodern culture are going largely unchallenged. Well-presented Christian truth, applicable to the issues raised, is missing. It's not missing in action; it's missing from action. Counterfeit worldviews are winning the battle for men and women's minds by default. They are winning, not because Christians aren't witnessing to the nonbeliever, but because Christians cannot answer some of the nonbeliever's bigger questions.

But we ought to be able to answer these questions. We possess the truth. Through the Spirit's enabling, a Christian worldview increases our spiritual discernment, allowing us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). In a Christian worldview, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, for God's moral law exists for all of life. Nothing is beyond his concern or his control. This most certainly encompasses all social change, as well as humanity's attempts at culture without him. And this includes Christians and our sometimes culturally confused attempts to build his church.

THE CHRISTIAN CULTURE WARS

The church has too frequently equated its forms and methods with the essence of Christianity. In other words, Christians have asserted that what they do in their particular church *is* Christianity. As a direct result, no matter where you go, you'll find Christian people who are fussing, fuming, and fighting with each other. We're "bit-

ing and devouring each other,” in danger of being “destroyed by each other” (Gal. 5:15). Over what?

The turbulence brought about by rapid social change causes us to hold on tightly to our comfort-giving, habitual forms, methods, and practices. They become our port in the storm. Rather than grab on to the eternal principles of Scripture and apply them in a new and relevant way, which is what a well-developed Christian worldview enables us to do, we hold on to our familiar cultural practices. Then we fight with others who are doing the same thing. When this happens, our Christian testimony is lost to the world, and we rapidly become anachronistic to the rapidly changing culture.

Sometimes these battles center on doctrinal debates, which have taken place throughout the history of Christianity and are recognized by the church as legitimate discussions of belief. Much more often in this era, though, church conflicts focus on cultural issues, matters of choice and preference born in a rapidly changing social environment. I’m talking about music, church service worship formats, clothing, entertainment, hairstyles and other matters of personal appearance, and much more.

I know of a church in the state of Michigan that split because the people could not agree on whether to allow contemporary music styles. I know of another church in a southern state in which women are not permitted to wear slacks to services. Still another church lost many families when the pastor and church leadership decided to schedule a nontraditional seeker service, not on Sunday but on a different night of the week. I’ve known churches in which men had to cut their hair a certain length to be allowed to sing in the choir. One church in Iowa won’t allow guitars, while another in the same state won’t allow organs. I’ve read church constitutions that deny membership to people who smoke or otherwise use tobacco or drink any alcohol. Some fundamentalist churches have staked their claim to faith on the King James Version of the Bible, considering all other versions a form of apostasy. I’ve talked with many pastors who became victims of church culture wars, some of whom left the ministry in disillusionment.

Christian people who identify their choices of forms, methods, lifestyle, and practice as the *only* truly biblical and Christian way of doing things usually create their own “holy list.” This practice is common among Christian churches of virtually every denomination. A Christian or group of Christians begins to judge other Christians’

spirituality on the basis of their list. This attitude implies, of course, that if you don't make the same choices, you're not spiritual, not biblical, and maybe not even Christian. What begins as a preference shifts to a presumptuous, even arrogant attitude of "my way is the only way." It's the Christian's version of political, or should I say spiritual, correctness. Not long after the holy lists are created, the Christian culture wars begin.

These Christian culture wars have split churches, schools, mission agencies, even families, along with just about every other form of Christian enterprise you can name. People align themselves against each other in their own version of a civil war. Meanwhile the real enemies—sin, Satan, and his counterfeit religious worldviews—advance virtually uncontested.

The intriguing but grievous part about all this is that it's so unnecessary—and sinful. God did not put us into a changing world without telling us something about who he is or how to evaluate whether change is good, bad, or indifferent. Or dare I say it? God did not leave us without telling us how to *allow others* to be different and maybe even how we might learn to *enjoy* morally appropriate social change or different cultural practices. In the unchanging principles of the Word of God, he gave us exactly what we need.

BORN AGAIN FREE

Social change might give us fits, but it wouldn't be nearly the problem it's been if Christians practiced the teachings of biblical Christianity. Since the church has not developed its understanding of a biblically Christian worldview, it has become more inward focused—privatized. Consequently, the church has gradually lost its cultural foothold and become progressively more marginalized from the issues plaguing our times. First modern then postmodern culture has been all too willing to accommodate this shift.

Christians living without a Christian worldview or with an undeveloped Christian worldview create a church less prepared to address life in community. Without a biblically defined Christian worldview the church has no means of balancing the inevitable tensions of the one and the many or unity and diversity. If the church does not live by biblical norms for unity and diversity, then

either unity or diversity eventually assumes a dominant position. The church may drift toward a maximized unity—meaning individuality is almost impossible to maintain as everyone is expected to subscribe to the party line on all matters of practice. Or the church gradually embraces a maximized diversity—meaning community is almost impossible to maintain as individuals pursue whatever seems right in their own eyes. Both extremes generate Christian culture wars.

Scripture provides the perfect answer. A Christian worldview celebrates both community and individuality, balancing and integrating the two. This is pictured in both the family and the body of Christ, with the perfect example being the Trinity. God created us to live freely in community with the ability and responsibility to make choices, and he gave us the doctrine of Christian liberty to guide those choices.

Christian liberty is the biblical teaching that Christians have been provided with God-given moral commands (“everything we need for life and godliness” in 2 Peter 1:3) regarding a certain limited list of vitally important matters, like honesty or sexual morality, on which we can build our lives and culture. Beyond these “moral absolutes,” God grants Christians the freedom to make judgments about what is best for their lives and culture.

But there’s a problem. While Romans 14, along with other passages of Scripture, develops the doctrine of Christian liberty, the church seems to have skipped that part of the Bible. Christian liberty may be the least understood and least practiced biblical doctrine. Christian people have not grasped what it means to embrace a faith that is both transcultural, meaning that it applies to all cultures, and transhistorical, meaning that our faith applies to human cultures through all time. We haven’t understood the implications of our spiritual gift of liberty, and we certainly haven’t wanted to allow others to experience it.

This is not to say that everything done in the name of Christian liberty is legitimate and appropriate. Certainly God has not said this. But the Christian culture wars make it plain that Christians have a lot to learn about social change and their liberty in Christ. I’m saying that with a little effort we can learn what God has to say about social change and order, how we can live responsibly before him in history, and how we may even come to enjoy the incredible creativity (the differing ideas) that God has placed in the hearts of men and women made in his image.

All this means that Christians must go through a period of study, thought, and re-evaluation that will take much of our energy. Conflicts will arise within Christian circles as older people especially are not consciously aware of this need for re-orientation, and therefore think that the old answers are still valid and sufficient. It is not that the foundation has to change, or that the basic doctrines have lost their meaning. But the expression and formulation of them sometimes needs rethinking as we listen afresh to God's Word, and seek to present it to the new world in which we are now living.¹⁰

UNCHANGING TRUTH IN CHANGING TIMES

Contemporary culture is the product of religious worldviews and human actions inherited from social history and constructed by men and women living today. This rapidly changing culture, the "world" as the Bible calls it, is dominated by the prince and power of the air and a legion of non-Christian worldviews. These worldviews are pretenders to real faith, and every day they combat and compete with a Christian perspective. Our responsibility and privilege as Christians living in this age is to live out our Christian faith.

God has given Christians both the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission. We are stewards of the world and of the Word. To please God, we must exercise our faith in him by caring for the world and carrying forth the Word. Because we know God, the unchanging Creator and sustainer of the universe and the author of the Bible, his eternal Word, social change is not a threat to us. It's an opportunity. It should not cause us to insulate ourselves in cocoons of ritual and tradition, but rather it should encourage us to apply our biblical faith vigorously, knowing that God's Word always makes an impact, never returning to him void.

Our challenge now is to develop our Christian worldview. Once we've learned this lesson, the homework assignment God gave us will be a lot more fun.